

COMICS



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Comics are for kids, which is perfect, because so is *Voiceworks*. We want to bust these myths, so come write for us: enlighten the world to the misunderstood cultural value of comics; promote those underground comics that would change everyone else's life, too; discuss the anticipation-cum-frustration-cum-joy of attaining the final installation of a graphic novel series; gain an excuse to approach Neil Gaiman. Come write for *Voiceworks*.

HOW FRANK MILLER MURDERED POP

Tay Arse

'There will, of course, have to be a "good Arab" or two to prove the comic isn't prejudiced. I'm guessing an Iraqi commando on our side.'

When I had finished a degree in creative writing I found it harder to write than I did when I began. Those bastards at UTS made me read stuff by this guy called Heidegger. It was bloody difficult and I didn't understand a word of it. They made me think about where I as a writer manifested within a text. They told me that my readers had as much input to the meaning of my work as I did. 'Meaning exists *between* the text and the reader,' they said. They told me that there was no such thing as truth, that history had ended, that all stories had already been told. They told me that if I was to write about a banana then I would be *destroying* the banana in the act of writing it (but if I was going to eat the banana, could I please wait until after class).

I did eat the banana after class, and instead of labouring over Heidegger while I ate it, I read one of Frank Miller's *Sin City* comics. *Sin City* made me remember why I started writing in the first place. The visuals make me swoon. You can feel the grit flying off of the pages and getting stuck between your grinding teeth as you read. It's a masterpiece of both visual and narrative stylisation. *Sin City* reminds me that before I had literary ambition I was a pop-culture consumer, that all of us were pop-culture consumers and that no writing has more value than a ripping narrative.

My only concern is that Frank Miller is probably a bigot.

This February at Wondercon '06 in San Francisco, Frank announced to the usual audience of pasty faces, receding hairlines and pot bellies, that he was working on a new *Batman* book and the bad guys would be al-Qaeda. He talked romantically of the days when Captain America and Superman appeared on the covers of respective Marvel and DC comics punching Adolf Hitler's lights out, he criticised the entertainers of today and their reluctance to make brazen political statements like comic artists did in the World War Two era, and worst of all, he openly declared that this new book

would be a piece of 'blatant propaganda'.

'Batman is going to kick al-Qaeda's arse!' he says. 'It's a reminder to people that we are up against a ruthless foe.' He then goes on to say, 'It seems silly to have Batman chasing the Riddler when there's al-Qaeda out there.'

Huh!?!

This is Frank Miller? This is the guy who took a campy blue-suited Batman and made him the brooding Dark Knight that we know and love today? This is the same Frank Miller who left DC comics in the eighties because he didn't support comic-book ratings or censorship? What's going on? He's not allowed to contribute to the rhetoric of the War-on-Terror. He's Frank Miller. Batman *should* be chasing the Riddler. The Riddler is evil. The Riddler is that maniacal, yellow-toothed, puppy-poisoning sort of evil that doesn't exist in the real world. That's why we don't feel guilty when we watch him get beaten. Isn't it?

These quotes from Big Frank indicate that he's looking at real world conflict like the War-on-Terror on the same screen that he uses to view his own narratives. It's a screen with the contrast knob turned up as far as it'll go, but if al-Qaeda are the definition of comic-book-style evil in his eyes, then who personifies the benevolent virtue of the Superheroes? Bush? Rumsfeld? Or perhaps a kid driving a tank through Bagdad gunning down Ay-rabs while listening to his i-pod?

Larry Gonnick, a cartoonist from San Francisco who writes historical comics, had some interesting things to say in response to Miller's announcement. 'A standard-issue treatment,' he says, 'would show [al-Qaeda] as another crew of generic swarthy bad guys, and there will, of course, have to be a "good Arab" or two to prove the comic isn't prejudiced. I'm guessing an Iraqi commando on our side.' Of course the token 'good Arab' will serve a racist comic in the same way that a disclaimer like 'I've got heaps of friends who are Lebs/Wogs/Aboriginal' serves a racist opinion.

Gonnick also points out the way that Miller is able to make sadism, torture, and graphic violence seem perfectly reasonable. He's right. *Sin City* is chock full of reasonable atrocities. In *A Dame to Kill For*, Marv says that he loves hitmen because 'no matter what you do to them you don't feel bad'. Making torture palatable is a great talent to have when making propaganda for the War-on-Terror. Will Miller draw Batman overseeing prisoner interrogation at Guantanamo Bay? Will he be able to use some of his cool gadgets to get that vital piece of information from a would-be terrorist?

Comics have always been a vessel for propaganda. Way, way back in the day when the printing press was still cutting-edge technology, Martin Luther brought about the Protestant Reformation using cartoons (those cool wood-cut ones) showing hypocrisy in the upper echelons of the Catholic Church. To get people looking at your comic back then, you just had to pin it to the heavy wooden door of the Town Hall with your rapier. Everyone was into sequential art because most people were illiterate.

Even before Martin Luther, in 1066, when William the Conqueror made his triumphant return to London from the Battle of Hastings, what was the first thing he did as the new King? He made a giant comic, the Bayeux Tapestry, detailing how noble he was during the battle and how much of a weenie his vanquished foe Harold was.

In more recent history, people were still using comics to get the support of the flat-headed masses. We're all familiar with those Norman Lindsay World War Two cartoons where the Hun is depicted as this giant slobbering beast and Western purity is drawn in the form of a hot chick or a helpless child. Up until the seventies the only Asian representations in Western comics were buck toothed 'yellow peril' in endless rehashed World War Two adventures. These days we can buy a Marvel comic called *Combat Zone: True tales of GIs in Iraq* and of course the new *Batman* propaganda book that will be entitled *Holy Terror Batman!*

This whole al-Qaeda thing has given me a completely different reading of the *Sin City* series. What once was a wholesome roll in the autumn leaves now seems like a grovel in hard rubbish. *Sin City* was a place where we didn't mind when Marv called Wendy a 'crazy god-damn broad' because it was ironic kitsch, and Wendy didn't mind

being called a 'crazy god-damn broad' for the same reason. Now I feel that the ironic kitsch has been taken away from the story, and all that remains is a misogynist aftertaste.

Sin City was a place where you knew what was good and what was evil, and that was comforting because we had lost the distinction long ago in our real lives. Now it has become a brutish story written by a redneck who believes that the real world can be simplified into comic book dualisms. Frank Miller's comic worlds were places where I could leave my political sensitivities at the door, where I didn't have to be constantly worrying about what was right or wrong. This, I thought, was what made a good pop narrative so comforting. I guess I now recognise that it's also what makes good propaganda so comforting. I feel like a sucker.

It's not just *Sin City* that has gone sour. Last week I finally got my hands on the hardcover edition of *The 300*, a lovely looking comic by Miller and Lynn Varley. At first glance it's a great story - 300 Spartans take on an entire Persian invasion force. Looking more carefully though, you can derive disturbing subtexts.

It is really another story of the Arab world threatening the enlightened West. The Persian army is depicted as a savage force that seeks to dismantle the developments of Greek civilisation, and the Spartan leadership is brutal and uncompromising, but only, of course, for the greater good of the Western world. There is no mention of the profound cultural and technological developments of the Persian Empire.

'What I tried to get across here,' says Frank while being interviewed about *The 300*, 'is that what is being defended is much larger than the fate of one country. It could be argued that without what ended up to be only 300 Spartans, we couldn't even be having this conversation, because all our notions of free speech, of democratic freedom, would have been erased by a tyrant.' Take that last sentence out of context. Replace 'Spartans' with 'Marines' and say it with a strong southern American accent. Apparently they had the War-on-Terror in Ancient Greece as well.

Right now in Australia, comics are only supported by awkward people with expendable incomes that have spare time to go to the comics shop. We're quite a specific segment of society really. Everyone who makes the comics, including Miller, can be quoted complaining about the lack of respect that the medium is given. The comic has just as much literary potential

as the written word, they say. It can convey complex characters, themes and emotions with an economy that you'd find only in the best prose and poetry, they say. It's just that the cultural establishment (in the West) is far too slow to recognise it. Poor little undervalued comics eh?

After having a little think you can understand this lack of respect. Why should the literati embrace the comic? Why should we hope to see more graphic novels in the *Times Literary Supplement*? Are we silly enough to hope that things are going to change when the most respected comic artists and comic writers are still recycling old-fashioned ideas of good and evil, of right and wrong? It seems to me that any open-minded, would-be comic fan will pick up a copy of Frank Miller's new *Batman* book, flick through it and then toss it down muttering: 'I'm not paying ten bucks an issue for fucking propaganda.' I'd like to see the creators of comics stop whinging that their medium isn't given any respect and start making thoughtful work that deserves it.

Sure, Frank Miller has the knack for creating lucid characters, but so does conservative America. We need a picture drawn for us to recognise Miller's great villains, but for a vivid image of America's great nemesis, just use 'the T-word'. Old Frankie boy can obviously see that someone else has created a better character than any he could ever think up. Fuck, he probably even fears this imaginary villain himself. I for one have lost faith in the bastard. He's ruined pop. It makes me want to go out and do a PhD in poetics or something.

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Well this is my last issue as the comics writer for *Voiceworks*. I'm older now, more cantankerous, and I've learnt how to grow a beard. If you want to learn how to grow a beard while writing about the comics you love/hate, then email (editor@expressmedia.org.au) and talk yourself up. But don't limit yourself to a beard! You could grow mushrooms, toenails or various species of algae!

I'm not yet 25 though, so *Voiceworks* isn't done with me yet. They're making me the comics editor. If you make comics or someone you know makes comics then let's see em. Email me at batteredmidgets@yahoo.com.au. *Voiceworks* loves comics.

Thanks, it's been real special.
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